

Remarks at the opening of the second session of the House of Representatives
Speaker Jimmy Naifeh
January 11, 2000

Welcome to the first meeting of the Tennessee General Assembly in the 21st Century. We closed a chapter of the State's history a week and half-ago when we entered the new millenium. We thankfully turned that corner in this State without too many glitches, thanks to the work of a great many dedicated men and women.

Last year, this body faced many difficult issues. There was great animosity among the members and dissension among the body. That is to be expected when the issues are great, and the consequences important.

We need to be honest with ourselves and with the people of the State. We did not come up with any solutions to dealing with the long-range financial concerns of the State of Tennessee. It doesn't matter where you were on the argument; we never solved the problem. And because we didn't solve the problem, it remains for us to deal with again this year.

Many of you have publicly stated that you are not excited about the thought of returning to this session. I know that is the result of all the tensions that were mounted last year.

We can either continue to bicker and work apart. Or we can begin to heal the wounds that divided us and start working together for the benefit of the people of this State. The choice is ours to make. The decision is up to each and every one of us.

To me, the choice is easy. I was elected to serve the people of my district. I have a responsibility to work hard on behalf of the 81st District. And I have a responsibility to deal with the issues that need addressing. And you have that same responsibility on behalf of the people of your district as well.

And I was elected by you to serve as your Speaker of the House and I intend to work hard at that responsibility.

The New Year is here. It is time to put aside the difficulties of the past and it is time to get this State moving forward again.

As for the budget, there are two simple parameters that we start out with this year.

1. Our budget must be balanced.
2. The votes are not there for major tax reform in Tennessee.

I very much appreciate the courage that the Governor of this State showed last year in working to reform our tax structure. He had a vision of where he wanted this State to go and he attempted to move this State towards that goal. But it was made clear to me during the last special session and it has been made clear to me since that time that the votes are simply not there at this time. And until someone can clearly demonstrate that the votes are there for real tax reform, I believe that the General Assembly's time has to be spent determining what realistic ways exist for balancing next year's budget.

I am, therefore, again calling on our Finance Committee to immediately begin working on the viable options that exist to balance the State's budget. This begins at 1:30 this afternoon.

Those options, at this time, do not include an income tax but instead could include increased revenues, restructuring priorities within the existing budget, or making hard cuts.

Numerous people called for making government more efficient. Ladies and gentlemen, we do not need a budget crisis to be looking for ways to make our government work more efficiently. We ought to be doing that everyday.

But in keeping with that renewed call, I am requesting that this chamber get to work immediately in getting bills on notice and getting bills to the floor. I want every single committee, with the exception of the Finance and Calendar Committees, to attempt to shut down by the end of March. That gives you eleven weeks to take care of the business of your Committee. There is no reason that we cannot make our committees work faster and get our work done more efficiently. By doing that, we not only make government work better, we are saving the taxpayers of this State money.

I also want you to think, as you go about your duties, of ways that the State can become more efficient in its work. Whether it is by combining services or eliminating seldom used programs, I ask you to assist in this process. Generic discussions do not help; but reasonable and well thought out ideas do. And in order for you to make sure that your ideas get to me, I am asking you to give them to Connie Hardin of our Budget Office.

And as we deal with the issues of the Budget, we cannot forget the rest of our duties to the State. The concerns about the TennCare program should be everyone's concerns, not just the Administration's. We should be ready and willing to assist the Administration in whatever ways are necessary to strengthen and assure the longevity of the TennCare Program. To keep us informed on this extremely important issue, I am asking Doug Jackson as Co-Chairman of the TennCare Oversight Committee to report weekly to this body as a whole on the efforts being made by the Administration to deal with the concerns about TennCare. I have confidence in the work of Commissioner John Ferguson and Assistant Commissioner John Tighe; we must be ready to help.

One other issue needs addressing today. Questions have arisen lately regarding issues concerning the welfare of our children. The inability of our new child support system to get payments to waiting parents for their children concerned all of us. Before the end of last year, I, along with a combination of House Democrats and Republicans, met with Commissioner Metcalf of the Department of Human Services, in an effort to understand the problems with the existing system. The report I got from the Commissioner indicated an awareness of the problem and a plan to solve it. I told the Commissioner that day and I tell her again today, this body stands ready and willing to assist you in any way possible to make sure that the money flows to the right person in a timely manner.

I know that there are several groups already looking at child support concerns. In order to keep everyone informed, I am asking that Deputy Speaker Brenda Turner, Chairman Joe Fowlkes, Chairlady Carol Chumney, and Rep. Bob Patton check in with the Commissioner during the next several months and be prepared to identify to this Chamber any actions that we need to take in this vital matter.

The same thing holds true for the Governor's recently appointed task force on day care centers. Our children must be safe in their day cares; and their parents must feel comfortable that the highest standards of care are being practiced. The Governor appointed a task force to look into this matter; those House members serving on that task force, Speaker pro tem Lois

DeBerry, Chairlady Carol Chumney, Chairman Joe Fowlkes, and Chairman Page Walley, need to let us know if there are steps that we should be taking to keep our children as safe as they can possibly be.

We have work to do; there are issues to be reviewed and acted upon. Sure we have budget concerns--but we have quality of life concerns as well.

This State and the citizens of this State deserve our full attention. They deserve nothing less.

It is a New Year and the beginning of a new century. As elected representatives of the citizens of Tennessee, it is going to be our responsibility to help write this new chapter in our State's history; how we write it is up to each and every one of us. I ask that you join with me and that, together, we get this new century off on the right path.

Thank you.